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THE SOURCES OF *VENICE PRESERVED*.

THOMAS OTWAY'S masterpiece, *Venice Preserved*, was first performed at the Duke's Theatre in Dorset Garden some time during February, 1681-2. The source of the play has long been known to be Saint-Réal's romantic history, *Conjuración des Espagnols contre la République de Venise*, which Otway adopted very freely for the most part, though he did not scruple to appropriate the speeches of the conspirators word for word when they suited his dramatic purpose. The character of Antonio, for which no hint is found in Saint-Réal, is regarded as a lampoon on the Whig leader Shaftesbury. References in the prologue to the Popish Plot and to Poland's choice of a king make it certain that the author intended this identification.

Certain elements in Otway's plot, however, which have hitherto been regarded as entirely his own, were, I believe, suggested by another play popular at the time. Let us first consider what parts of the tragedy and what characters Otway did not find in the history essentially as he used them. In the first place, he changed the motive of the plot by the introduction of the heroine Belvidera, who is represented as the daughter of the Venetian senator Priuli, and the wife of Jaffier,<sup>1</sup> the conspirator who in the tragedy, as in Saint-Réal, betrays his companions in arms. Thus while Saint-Réal made the man discover the conspiracy to the senate through sheer faint-heartedness after he has heard what bloodshed must follow, Otway explained his defection by the appeals of Belvidera, who, after an unsuccessful attempt to move him on behalf of her father, recounts that an attempt on her honor has been made by Renault, another conspirator, to whom she has been entrusted as a hostage of Jaffier's good faith. The character of Belvidera, then, and the circumstance of her

<sup>1</sup> Spelled Jaffeir in first ed. *V. P.*; cf. reprint by Gollancz.

being held as surety, two factors very important in the tragedy, are not found in *Saint-Réal*, and must either have been of Otway's own invention or have been taken from some other source. Again, the particular form in which the Earl of Shaftesbury is so vilely caricatured must somehow be accounted for, since there is no buffoon in the *Conjuration*.

Of course it is unnecessary to assume *a priori* that a dramatist of such ability as Otway need have had a source for these changes, but it is interesting and important to know that he actually did receive something more than a hint for them from a tragedy by his contemporary and friend Nathaniel Lee. This play was *Cæsar Borgia*, produced at the Dorset Garden Theatre in 1680. It is in some respects the poorest as well as the most bombastic of the author's works, though it has many beauties concealed among the rubbish of its verbiage; but what is of more importance for the present purpose, it was successfully played and well known in its day. The plot, which he took from Gomberville's *Pharamond*,<sup>1</sup> turns upon the rivalry of Cæsar Borgia and his brother Palante, Duke of Gandia, for Bellamira, daughter of Orsino, who finally consents to sacrifice herself to Cæsar in order to save her father and her lover from death. In the end, nevertheless, Orsino and Palante, together with the heroine herself, fall victims to the monster's brutality.

The similarity in the fate of the heroine with that of Belvidera is the only likeness between the two plays apparent from this brief statement; and taken by itself this similarity of character and fate as well as the resemblance between the two names would in no wise prove that Otway took a hint from Lee in the composition of *Venice Preserved*. This might be chance, especially as Bellamira is the dupe of Machiavel, and so partially responsible for the succeeding misfortunes, while Jaffier's weakness and folly are the cause of Belvidera's fate. But when there is added to this the fact that Cæsar Borgia gives his little son, Seraphino, as a hostage of his good faith to Orsino and Vitellozzo, the similarity becomes striking. The passage in question runs as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Cf. article on Nathaniel Lee by Sidney Lee, in *Dict. Nat. Biog.*

*Borgia.* Behold this Child, my Son!  
 I know not anything the World calls precious,  
 Which in the darkness of my heart can match him,  
 But *Bellamira*. Take him *Vitellozzo*,  
 Take the dear Blood that trickles from my heart,  
 The very Strings that wind about my Life,  
 And let him for my part be surety,  
 As beauteous *Bellamira* is for yours.<sup>1</sup>

In the corresponding passage of *Venice Preserved*, Jaffier, to prove himself a resolute conspirator, says to the assembled leaders :

Still I see  
 The cause delights me not. Your friends survey me,  
 As I were dangerous—but I come armed  
 Against all doubt, and to your trust will give  
 A pledge, worth more than all the world can pay for.  
 My Belvidera! Ho! My Belvidera!

Accordingly Belvidera, who is ignorant of the whole undertaking, enters. After some conversation, her husband says :

To you, sirs, and your honours, I bequeath her,  
 And with her this, when I prove unworthy—[*Gives a dagger.*  
 You know the rest:—then strike it to her heart;  
 And tell her, he, who three whole happy years  
 Lay in her arms, and each kind night repeated  
 The passionate vows of still-increasing love,  
 Sent that reward for all her truth and sufferings.<sup>2</sup>

It is impossible for me to doubt that Otway took the suggestion for this scene, as well as for the character of Belvidera, from Lee.

A still more striking correspondence, however, is found in the similarity of Antonio (a fine speaker in the senate) to Ascanio (a buffoon cardinal) of the earlier play. Not only is there resemblance in name, as in the case of Bellamira-Belvidera, but the fact that no such person is found in Saint-Réal, and that the two are pictured in almost precisely the same way, gives sufficiently convincing proof of the hypothesis. Ascanio plays a more important part than does Antonio, but both are clowns,

<sup>1</sup> Act I, Sc. 2. I quote from the edition of 1713.

<sup>2</sup> Act II, Sc. 3.

and clowns of precisely the same type,—elderly fools characterized by a brainless flow of words and a satyr's passion for a young woman. That Antonio is as unnecessary for the movement of the play as Ascanio rather adds to than detracts from the force of the argument. Apparently Otway, wishing to lampoon Shaftesbury, found in Lee's popular drama a personage ready made to his hand. The folly of the two buffoons even finds vent in similar language, which gives a touch of finality to the proof. The first words which Ascanio speaks on his entrance are these :

Well, *Borgia*, well ! if I am not reveng'd !  
Was there none else in *Rome*, but *Bellamira* ?  
Ah *Bella*, *Bella*, *Bella*, *Bellamira* !  
I saw her first at *Mass*, as I remember ; etc.<sup>1</sup>

Antonio says to Aquilina, when he first enters :

'Nacky, Nacky, Nacky—how dost do, Nacky ? Hurry durry. I am come, little Nacky ; etc.'<sup>2</sup> This kind of thing Antonio repeats *ad nauseam*, though Ascanio is not permitted to express himself further in the same fashion. Yet the hint for it was given by Lee.

I have pointed out what I believe to be a clear case of borrowing on the part of Otway. I do not wish thereby to disparage him. *Venice Preserved* is incomparably a greater play than *Cæsar Borgia*, so great indeed that any information with regard to its composition is interesting and valuable. Whatever material Otway borrowed from Saint-Réal, and whatever hints from Lee, he used to the best advantage, and he made them his own in what is perhaps the finest tragedy of the Restoration period.

GORDON HALL GEROULD.

BRYN MAWR COLLEGE.

<sup>1</sup> Act I, Sc. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Act III, Sc. 1.